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avigators use maps to chart a course. Although unforeseen events and variables may affect their journey, they begin by making important choices about their route to avoid a meandering, rudderless voyage. In similar fashion, teachers must make critical choices as they plot a course for their learners. Essential questions are an exceptional tool for clearly and precisely communicating the pivotal points of the curriculum.

To refine is to improve by introducing distinction. Curriculum maps provide a natural format for such refinement. Employing essential questions upgrades the quality of unit plans. This chapter defines the nature of essential questions, identifying the kinds of questions that are valuable for refining and organizing the curriculum in the individual classroom and throughout the school. . . .

What is an Essential Question?

An essential question is the heart of the curriculum. It is the essence of what you believe students should examine and know in the short time they have with you.

Ted Sizer’s classic work Horace’s Compromise (1984) was a breakthrough in revealing the daily routine of a teacher grappling with conceptual priorities being consumed day in and day out by nonessential, frivolous lessons. Essential questions can help combat this phenomenon. If your 6th graders are about to embark on a study of the U.S. Constitution for four weeks, as a curriculum write you need to ask, “What are the most important concepts that my students should investigate about the Constitution in our four weeks? What should they remember and reflect on a year from now?” In his provocative article “The Futility of Trying to Teach Everything of Importance,” Grant Wiggins (1989) points out that we often avoid the heart of the curriculum and cover the periphery. When this happens, learners fail to see the essential purpose of their learning and simply complete tasks because “they’re supposed to.” Student assessments should focus on essential learning, not merely a task for its own sake.

The essential question is just that: a question. The interrogative suggests investigation and inquiry rather than the more militaristic and directive term “objective”. When the curriculum is formed around questions, the clear message to the students is that you are probing with them. Compare a 6th grade class examining “How is the Constitution the backbone structure of America?” to a topical study beginning with the objective: “The student will look at the three branches of the government as organized in the Constitution.” Typical Roman numeral outline approaches to curriculum do not engage learners in inquiry; rather, they imply preset answers.

The essential question also is an organizer. To structure an array of activities, it’s wise to group activities under essential questions similar to chapter headings in a book. In this way, you can avoid the common “potpourri” problem, which is the random assortment of well-intended activities with no structure (Jacobs 1989).

The potpourri problem plagues many curriculums. Imagine being a 5th grade student about to study ancient Egypt. You have little or no background on the subject. The teacher runs you through a set of activities with no backbone or reference points. You study a little on the Nile, a little on the Egyptian gods and myths, a little on the pyramids, a little on Egyptian irrigation tools, a little on some pharaohs, and a little on some key events. You have received a curricular smorgasbord rather than a cohesive experience. And as a 5th grader, you need all the help you can get to organize your readings and activities! A set of essential questions offers focus throughout a unit of study.

The essential question is a creative choice. . . . With the slightest change, a pedestrian question can become thought provoking. A question such as, “What was the effect of the Civil War?” can be revised to, “Is the Civil War still going on?”

This does not mean that every question has to be clever. In fact, simple questions can be very provocative to children. In the unit on Flight featured in Interdisciplinary Curriculum: Design and Implementation (Jacobs 1989), the first question was, “What flies?” Students pursued the question identifying everything from birds, bees, fish, and space shuttles to the notion that time flies and ideas fly. They key is to create a question of genuine perplexity to the learner.

The essential question is conceptual commitment. When a teacher or group of teachers selects a question to frame and guide curricular design, it is declaration of intent. In a sense you are saying, “This is our focus for learning. I will put my teaching skills into helping my students examine the key concept implicit in the essential question.” Given the limited time you have with your students, curriculum design has become more and more an issue of deciding what you won’t teach as well as what you will teach. You cannot do it all. As a designer, you must choose the essential.

The essential question is a skill to be encouraged in students, too. Learners of all ages should be encouraged to raise and to consider essential questions. Children enter kindergarten bursting with questions. Some are offbeat: Why aren’t there purple eyes? . . . Still others are probing: Why aren’t there any dinosaurs around anymore? An early learner’s questions are essential; there is nothing coy about them. These students are not out to impress others with their questions; they ask readily about everything.

As children get older, they ask fewer essential questions and more managerial or mundane questions. By early adolescence, we hear too many variations on this question from students: Teacher, is this what you want? Modeling question formation is central to teaching question formation. Even young students can make judgments about different kinds of questions and their inherent value. Children can learn to recognize, appreciate, and generate essential questions.

How Can Essential Questions Serve as a Scope and Sequence?

The term “scope and sequence” is applied in a variety of ways in curriculum planning. It can be used to describe the scope and sequence of skills and concepts being targeted as key objectives for a subject for the year. For example, educators might refer to the scope and sequence of skills in mathematics for 2nd graders. A history teacher in a high school might refer to the scope and sequence of skills and concepts for a year-long course on Western Civilization. The intention is to provide a blueprint of desired goals. Unfortunately, the language can become stiff and generic in scope and sequence goals statements. For example, statements such as these are more than little bureaucratic:

• The student will recognize personal responsibility to the community.

• The student will compute two-digit addition operations.

• The student will understand that there is a food chain in each ecosystem.

These statements are not thrilling to young learner – or their teachers for that matter!

I do not challenge the value of these three samples, but I do challenge the language. Given the nature of the task – which is to engage the learner – this is lousy writing. It is better suited to military commands or directions for assembling a file cabinet, where crisp, officious sentences are appropriate. If, as teachers and learners, we can revise these statements into essential questions, we have a much better chance to increase student motivation.

In a humanities unit designed by teachers at a New York City junior high school, these questions were posted for examination:

• How does my community affect my life?

• What do I owe my community? . . Or do I?

If you were 13 years old, would you rather study these questions or be told that “students will learn to recognize personal responsibility to the community?”

When composing a unit of study for investigation at any level of teaching, creating meaningful and clear essential questions can serve as scope and sequence to the structure of the study. An analogy to the table of contents of a book is apt. Just as the chapter headings in a table of contents describe the scope (range) and the sequence (order) of organization, so do a set of essential questions provide an advanced organizer for a curricular experience. They are the range and parameters of the study. They frame the essence of what your class can realistically examine in the amount of time you have to spend. The questions suggest a logical pattern of investigation through the time ahead for your students, whether it’s over the next two weeks or a whole year. The examples in Appendix II underscore the point that no matter what type of curriculum format, age group, or unit length, essential questions focus the learning experience.

What Are Criteria for Writing Essential Questions?

I have distilled the following list of criteria from hundreds of teachers around the country. The list suggests best writing practices for generating essential questions that will guide your learners and refine your teaching.

1. Each child should be able to understand the question.

The essential questions are ultimately for your students. If the learner cannot understand the language of the questions, then the purpose is defeated. Sometimes we adults get carried away with out polysyllabic syntax. An example of such indulgence is a question a junior high teacher used for his Civil War unit: “What were the intellectual underpinnings of sectionalism?” This is not a question written for your average 7th grader. Simple sounding questions do not necessarily connote simple answers. In a 1st grade unit on snow, the teachers declared the first essential question as: “What is snow?” the question lent itself to a range of activities from looking at the snow cycle to considering the difference between natural snow and artificial snow made at ski resorts. In short, questions should be clear to your students.

2. The language of the questions should be written in broad, organization terms.

The questions are umbrella-like organizers and should reflect a heading for the focus of a set of activities consider the following question from a unit on ancient Greece: “What were the major contributions of the Ancient Greeks?” This makes clear to the learner that through the completion of many activities, they will earn much about the major contributions of the Greeks. However, a question like “What did Socrates have for breakfast?” lacks organizational power. If a question is too specific, it is probably an activity itself or the point of a classroom discussion.

3. The question should reflect your conceptual priorities.

The essential question points to the essence of what your students will examine in the course of their study. What is the conceptual priority for them to write about, speak about, think about, and develop? Given the very real limits of time, we must make choices. The essential question forces the teacher to choose the conceptual outcome for the students. If students negotiate the questions with the teacher, they are choosing as well. In short, if 1st graders examine “What is snow?”, the teacher is setting as a conceptual priority an understanding of the nature of snow, its compositions, and its origins.

4. Each question should be distinct and substantial.

If a set of questions is akin to a set of chapters in a book, then there should be enough power and substance to hold a “chapter” together. A question such as “What makes a leader?” will require a number of activities and experience to engage the learner in an investigation. Contrast that with a question like, “What were Franklin D. Roosevelt’s favorite books?” Although the question itself might make for an interesting discussion in one class session, it will offer little more than that. The previously cited snow unit for 1st graders had two distinctive essential questions: What is snow? How does snow affect people? This cues students that there will be a set of activities examining the nature of snow and another set examining how snow affects people.

5. Questions should not be repetitious.

In my experience, repetitious questions are the most common error in curriculum design. In a unit on the tricentiennial celebration of a New England town, the middle school teachers used four essential questions:

• What is change?

• What causes change?

• How does change affect people?

• How has change affected our town over 300 years?

The first three questions were repetitious, which explains the teachers’ difficulty in figuring out where to place certain activities. Upon reflection, one of the teachers said, “How can one discuss change without looking at its cause and its impact on people? That’s what change is!”

If there are repetitious questions, they should be collapsed into one question with subheads. The questions above were edited to read: What is the nature of change? How has change affected our community? Just as a book chapter should have distinct content integrity, so should each essential question stand on its own without being blurred into another question.

6. The questions should be realistic given the mount of time allocated for the unit or course.

This is a pragmatic and critical decision that the designer must weigh. If you have three weeks to spend on a unit on China, the questions will most likely differ in number and kind from a three-month unit on China. It has been my observation that 2 to 5 questions is the average for a unit of study that ranges from 3 weeks to about 12 weeks. Too many questions overwhelm the learner.

7. There should be a logical sequence to a set of essential questions.

The test of a good series of questions is that you are able to explain to your students the rationale for the sequence. If that rationale is not clear, learners will likely have problems. The sequence does not have to be rigid. A teacher can move through the questions and return to previous ones. However, the questions should have a sense of focus and direction rather an arbitrary order.

8. The questions should be posted in the classroom.

At first this criteria appears to be simply a helpful hint. But it is one of the most crucial variables in predicting long-term retention and understanding on the part of children. Posting the question is a public declaration. The message to the learners is: These questions are essential for you. The questions provide a constant visual organizer and focus for the learner and for the teacher as well. The questions are a point of reference. When all the teachers participating in an interdisciplinary unit of study post the questions, the students have direct evidence that the teachers are not only talking with each other but share the view that the investigation of these questions is essential.

Seeing is believing. I recommend that teachers wrestle with the design of their units whether discipline based, interdisciplinary, or student centered, and they should focus those studies on essential questions. Curriculum maps in subsequent iterations after the first draft can become clear, precise, and powerful as teachers refine them with essential questions. When a teacher sits at a computer terminal and begins to review his or her maps, a critical and powerful refinement occurs as content is transformed into essential questions.